



‘Strange Habits’

Clothes, Climes, and the Environment in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries

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Clad in Rags: Ecopsychology and Transtextuality

In several of his play-texts, whatever their genres, Shakespeare physically and symbolically undresses characters to ‘dress them up better’ with rags. The dramatic and theatrical linguistic and semiotic signs audiences are thus provided with are laden with meanings necessarily related to a reflection on anthropocentrism, biocentrism and/or ecocentrism, exploring the place of Man, whether king or beggar, either in his own environment, or in a new strange locus, or more generally, on this earth.

Tragedy exploits situations in which human beings discover darker climes and experience reversals, by staging contexts when and where ‘habits’ turn ‘habits’ inside out or upside down and conversely. Man’s reaction to such un/natural changes transcends simple psychological responses. Comedy and (pastoral) romance also use ‘rags’ for hide-and-seek games and revelations, as in *The Tempest* or *The Winter’s Tale*.

Like any other piece of stage/drama-costume, tattered and torn clothes designed for a play help portray the characters’ general contextual situations, including historical and geographical ones (the fable) and the diegetic intimate ones they are involved in, indicating their social classes and personalities (madness, folly and decline are obvious instances). ‘Habits’ also reflect the characters’ inner feelings and idiosyncrasies although appearances are often deceitful. The inadequacy of surroundings and clothing (weather and insufficient winter clothing for instance) emphasizes the discrepancy between what is a sign of normality and what is not. Changing ‘habits’ informs about contextual events—whether historical or diegetic—and can amplify characters’ aspects. As a dramatic device, a tattered or ragged costume helps hide someone’s person/a and personality allowing dramatic irony to emerge from it, while mimicking History as in the Suffolk episode in *2 Henry 6*.

Our study aims at analysing the topic of ‘clad in rags: ecopsychology and transtextuality’ in different versions of the story of King Lear (that is in *King Lear*, *Leir and his Three Daughters*, and various chronicles and histories that might have been sources for Shakespeare’s play-text) to emphasize the philosophical and political choices made by chroniclers and dramatists in their treatments of ‘habits’ and ‘climes’. The last years of the life of King Lear and his daughter Cordelia vary depending on these options, and so do correlated interpretations.